

You can see it in their eyes? reading Roman portraits

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We often feel like we know the Roman emperors. Ancient books like Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars* present them as great leaders and warped tyrants, sometimes virtuous, often cruel, larger than life, but above all as personalities. Yet nowhere is our encounter with these personalities more immediate than in the observation of Roman portraits, whether we meet them in the collections of large galleries like the British Museum or in the incidental illustrations of coffee-table history books. Few can look at these images without adopting some view about the individuals represented. It is a sign of the expressive realism of many Roman portraits that as long as they have been studied people have seen in their faces a reflection of the subjects' characters.

In some cases it is not hard to imagine broadly what sort of impression was intended by the artist and his customer. For example, the portrait of the emperor Augustus is youthful and immaculate (and remained so even when the man was in his seventies); its smooth and restrained expression are reminiscent of some of the idealized sculptures of Classical Greece. It is an elevated image for the ideal leader. Augustus has gone down in history as a 'good emperor' – the first and the best – and his face fits the bill, though no one would suggest that it is a wholly truthful document of his appearance.

But what happens when we look at the faces of 'bad emperors': those whom posterity has condemned for cruelty, madness, megalomania and immorality? These are hardly the traits that an emperor would wish to stress in his portraiture or that anyone else (who valued their life) would want to emphasize. Yet it is just such characteristics that we often want to read into Roman portraits.

Signs of badness?

From the extensive rogues' gallery of depraved Roman rulers, a few examples will illustrate the point. First of all there is Gaius 'Little-boots' Caesar. His youthful face and short-cropped hair help to remind us of his relationship to the revered Augustus who was his great grandfather. But modern viewers have looked for signs of something else in his portraits – some sort of reflection of the deranged personality recorded by ancient authors (who were writing, it must be said, after Gaius had been assassinated and his regime demolished). This is the man who planned to make his horse consul (we are told) and who led the Roman legions to the north coast of France in order to collect seashells. A recent book on Roman art declares that Gaius Caligula's 'cruel personality shows clearly in the tight lips and distant eyes' and in Copenhagen there survives one portrait in particular whose deep-set eyes and uncompromising gaze have seemed to convey the subject's madness, the features enhanced by traces of a painted left eye and eyelashes that might almost earn it a place on the cover of *A Clockwork Orange*.

If Gaius has become the archetypally mad emperor, then Nero has always been the epitome of dissipation and decadence and cynical cruelty. Modern scholars sometimes think that his vices are expressed in the fleshy features represented even on coins (where still today we expect to see idealized images of the monarch). One such author writes that Nero's appearance mocks the concept of imperial authority and in his 'fat, bloated face'

and 'small glowering eyes' there is 'nothing to suggest that the rumours about his debauchery were exaggerated'!

It is not only the faces themselves that make us feel that we have an insight into the alarming dispositions of the Roman emperors. One of the most famous or notorious of imperial portraits is the image of Commodus that was found on the Esquiline Hill in Rome. Commodus's distinguished face and beard closely resemble those of his father Marcus Aurelius, whose reign in the second century A.D. has often been seen as the golden age of the Roman Empire: so no signs of evil or insanity there. But to our eyes the accompanying trappings are extraordinary, for the emperor is portrayed as the divine hero Hercules. He is bare-chested and holds Hercules's distinctive club. The 'hero' has just performed the last of his legendary Twelve Labours – retrieving the Apples of the Hesperides – and on his head he wears the prize from his first labour: the skin of the Nemean lion. Extraordinary to our eyes, but also to those hostile ancient writers who (well after the emperor's murder) described his real-life antics, dressing up as gods and performing with gladiators in the arena. To make matters worse, the Hercules-portrait seems to have been displayed on the emperor's own property. It is not hard to see why some modern writers have thought Commodus to be mad and immoral, and one recent book says that 'certainly Commodus's vanity did not escape the artist'.

In a world dominated by these imposing men, the images of imperial women seem more bland, their natures harder to imagine. But they too have been subjected to psychological analysis. Even the highly idealized face of Livia the wife of Augustus (which looks quite sweet and innocent to me) has been thought to reveal a hint of the flaws described in ancient literature. One bust in America, for example, is said by its cataloguer to reveal Livia's personality: 'We see her strong will and her taste for command, restrained only by self-imposed good manners'.

Interpreting emperors

So it is tempting to suppose that these precious fragments in modern museums can provide some kind of window onto the characters who inhabit the history books. But can they? We must first be cautious about the way we approach 'bad emperors'. We have no way of knowing what core of truth might be buried in the one-sided historical accounts that survive from antiquity and that tell us which rulers were 'good' and which ones were 'bad'. And when we do believe all the stories about the foul deeds of tyrants, we tend to brand these characters with vague labels that express our disapproval without explaining what (for better or worse) they were trying to do. 'Madness' has been attributed to a variety of despots in past and present. Perhaps an emperor like Gaius did suffer from mental illness; perhaps other emperors had a warped and eccentric grasp of reality. But the notion of madness does not help to explain them any more than it explains, say, the actions of Adolf Hitler and his popularity in 1930's Germany.

It need not explain portraits either. The problem is that Roman portraits are not mirrors, though they are often said to 'reflect' the personality of their subjects. They are elaborate, carefully

contrived fictions rather than momentary impressions of a particular person's character. We do not exactly know who decided what an imperial portrait would look like. It was probably the emperor himself who instructed artists, perhaps with the assistance of advisors or the artists themselves: we can only guess. The 'official' portrait was then copied by groups or individuals – sometimes town-councils or whole communities – all over the empire, who wanted some way of expressing (and showing off) their loyalty to the ruler. These images symbolized devotion, not contempt. So should we imagine an embittered sculptor secretly using his expressive powers to convey and mock the ridiculous or depraved characteristics of his subject? It is not impossible. But if so he managed to deceive not only the emperor himself, but all those who commissioned their own versions of the imperial portrait with no thought of subversion.

At the same time, it is always possible to suggest reasons for the dubious features that we perceive in some portraits – even for Nero's podgy and serious face, which recalls the luxuriant and powerful images of some Greek kings, or Commodus's fancy dress, which perhaps simply belongs within the long tradition of likening emperors to gods – especially the indefatigable hero Hercules – and even worshipping them as such when they were still alive. As for the little facial details such as the tight lips or the distant gaze – details that seem to betray the emperor's flaws: well, we should reflect on how much our judgements are shaped by what we think we already know about these figures, and remember that the Romans also 'read' people's faces, but not necessarily in the same way we do.

The language of faces

Instant judgements about other people's faces are familiar in our modern culture as in many others: mean mouth, eyes too close together, and so on. We should be glad that when we instinctively perceive negative features in each other's faces these first impressions are (often) quickly dispelled by further contact or interaction! In antiquity, however, such prejudices had been refined into a science – physiognomics – which might help to determine not only how facial features were viewed, but also how they were portrayed. That applies not just to portraits – which might be enhanced by the use of positive facial features – but also to the literary descriptions presented in ancient texts, some of them complimentary on balance, other's more decidedly negative. When Suetonius, writing several decades after the death of Nero, takes the trouble to say that the emperor's body was covered in spots and stank, or that his eyes were weak and his neck thick, he is not taking an unusually pedantic historical interest in his subject's personal hygiene or state of health, but providing an inventory of meaningful physiognomical features which probably stood for characteristics like wickedness, cowardice and bad temper. It is therefore quite wrong to use a writer like Suetonius (as many have been tempted to do) as a reliable document of appearances against which the accuracy of Roman portraits can be gauged.

I do not think the court sculptors of the Roman Empire surreptitiously mocked their powerful portrait subjects. But in one sense they have exercised a secret power, not over the emperor, but over posterity. The subtlety of their craft may not have been exploited to ridicule the ruler, but it continues to trick us into believing that we can see through it into their subjects' souls.

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